

Early Vancouver

Volume Two

By: Major J.S. Matthews, V.D.

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Narrative of Pioneers of Vancouver, BC Collected During 1932.

Supplemental to volume one collected in 1931.

About the 2011 Edition

The 2011 edition is a transcription of the original work collected and published by Major Matthews. Handwritten marginalia and corrections Matthews made to his text over the years have been incorporated and some typographical errors have been corrected, but no other editorial work has been undertaken. The edition and its online presentation was produced by the City of Vancouver Archives to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the City's founding. The project was made possible by funding from the Vancouver Historical Society.

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Contact Information

City of Vancouver Archives
1150 Chestnut Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6J 3J9
604.736.8561
archives@vancouver.ca
vancouver.ca/archives



THE FIRST GASOLINE SERVICE STATION. J.C. ROLLSTON.

The first gasoline station in Canada, possibly in North America, for the delivery of gasoline from a filling tank through a hose pipe to motor cars was started at the southeast corner of Cambie and Smythe Street, approximately after June 1908. The circumstances which suggested it were these. In order to give a more graphic outline in detail it is necessary to go back years.

The first intimation that a fuel for the use of internal combustion in motor cars, or as they were first called, automobiles, was received over the telephone of the Imperial Oil Company Limited, then having a monopoly of the sale of gasoline in Vancouver, by J.S. Matthews (Major), then a clerk in their office. The company was small at the time, its office staff was a manager, a travelling salesman and clerk-stenographer. The voice stated that Mr. Hendry, manager of the Hastings Sawmill, to whom the Imperial Oil Company Limited sold considerable petroleum lubricating oil, was in need of gasoline for his automobile; had they any in stock. The clerk explained that while they could get it in barrels—wood barrels; it was before the steel barrel was thought of—the barrels would have to be brought from the east; were very unsatisfactory as the gasoline escaped, more or less, through the wood. The voice asked if it was the gasoline used in automobiles; the clerk replied he had no knowledge, presumed it was; they sold it to drug stores for cleaning gloves, and to plumbers for fire pots. He also said they had benzine—a name subsequently forbidden by law to be used, as it was a misnomer—which they sold to salmon canneries for use in dissolving the solid lacquer to be applied to canned salmon to prevent the cans rusting. They could get 76 degree Baume gasoline in cases from the east; that was used once in a while for “Moore” hanging lamps, an early system of gasoline vapour lighting, the new system of lighting country hotels, halls, etc., by putting the 76 gasoline in a small tank, pumping an air pressure of about 10 or 15 lbs, which forced the gasoline vapour through a tiny pipe running like a wire to the burning lamp and its net mantle.

The outcome of the conversation was that a case of “D.S. Gasoline” (deodorized stove gasoline) used by plumbers was sent to the Hastings Mill; no more was heard of it, and further supplies were made later.

A week or so later the same voice asked the same clerk if they had any lubricating oil for automobiles. This was a more difficult problem for the clerk, who had never seen a motor car, but had read of them, and knew that if they burned gasoline there must be considerable heat somewhere. He sparred for time to see what they had; actually, he knew nothing of the subject. He decided that he would have to “take a chance,” so after considering all the physical conditions he judged might exist where gasoline was burned, etc., etc., he sent down a four gallon can of “Atlantic Red,” in a blank can. *It worked.* In fact, it worked so well that, under another name, millions upon millions of the same oil has since been marketed under fancy names and at fancy prices.

The Atlantic Red Engine oil was the same oil that the Hastings Sawmill had been buying in large quantities in barrels for use on their planing and other fast running machines. They paid 30 to 32 cents per imperial gallon in barrels, wood barrels.

THE FIRST GARAGE.

It was soon afterwards that the first garage or repair shop appeared, started by a Mr. Annand of a bicycle repair shop about fifty feet east of the southeast corner of Hastings and Columbia Avenue; later the West End Garage started at 924 Granville. Both institutions were primitive; Mr. Annand’s bicycle business was gradually supplanted by the increasing automobile business; the West End Garage had started as a repair garage for cars. The “Vancouver Garage” and the “West End Garage” soon became rivals; they also began introducing special oils for motor cars, and this fact precipitated trouble for the Imperial Oil Company Limited, and led to the introduction of the filling station. How this came about is as follows.

The clerk Matthews had been promoted to half-time city salesman, and on a visit to the Annand Garage one day was given a “terrible dressing down” by Mr. Annand because his employers were selling lubricating oil to automobile owners, to wit, the manager of the Hastings Sawmill. It appears that Mr. Hendry’s car had needed some attention, had been taken to Mr. Annand’s bicycle shop, Mr. Annand had put some lubricating oil in it, and charged \$1.50 per gallon. Mr. Hendry’s office man had “kicked” at the

price for the oil; said they had been buying very good oil from the oil company for thirty cents per gallon; said "I presume your other charges were in proportion." A five- or six-year fight between the garages and the oil company was on.

Time went on; more garages started up. They were all compelled to buy their gasoline from the Imperial company—there was no other source of supply for gasoline—and the company charged them twenty cents per gallon in tank wagons—and delivered it, at first in big iron drums of 90 gallons odd, afterwards a new type of delivery created by the conversion of the old kerosene (coal oil) tank wagons; the kerosene sales were declining with the spread of electric light, the gasoline sales were increasing, and for a time tank wagon carried both products in compartments with a blue painted tap for coal oil and a red one for gasoline. The first tank wagon in Vancouver (coal oil) held a total of 280 gallons divided into three compartments; then a "monster" wagon came holding no less than 420 gallons, also in three compartments. All were horse-drawn. The garages put in underground storage tanks, and the S.F. Bowser Co. furnished pumps, placed on the curb of the sidewalk, simple things, an adaptation of the former kerosene tank pump used for coal oil in grocery stores. Various agents, and also the garages, obtained agencies for diverse brands of lubricating oil, which they diligently "pushed" to the exclusion of Imperial Oil products of like nature. The animosity between the company and the garages on the matter of lubricating oils increased, and the garages had the upper hand, for whenever an automobile was brought into the repair shop, the garages immediately told the owner—frequently, regardless of the truth—that the "trouble" was with the oil, if it was other than their own, and especially if it was Imperial Oil. The Imperial Oil lubricating sales did not decrease; new cars were arriving, but the proportion of sales of gallons of lubricating oil grew lower and lower. They introduced a very fine oil called "Zerolene," but it made no headway.

In addition to this the garages sold the gasoline which they purchased for 20¢ per gallon from the monopoly for 35¢ to the car owner. The oil company protested; the garage man became violent at their interference, the car owner blamed the oil company for the "high price of gasoline," and took vengeance on the oil company by buying the garage man's lubricating oils, which suited the garage man exactly. The poor company caught it both ways, yet was the innocent party in both. And the travelling salesman Matthews, the company's only salesman at that time, "caught it" from both and all, including his employers.

Finally in desperation, one day he prevailed upon the manager, C.M. Rolston, to visit the West End Garage. They received so "warm" a welcome there that Mr. Rolston was glad to escape. Together they returned to the office. The company did not want to enter the retail business.

THE FIRST FILLING STATION FOR GASOLINE.

Finally the manager reluctantly gave permission. Matthews had long contended that the only way, or course, was to sell the automobile owner direct. Matthews was told he could tell automobile owners they could have their cars filled at the Imperial Oil warehouse for twenty cents per gallon.

The next morning Matthews was passing the old Court House on Hastings Street when a motor car chugged past; he signaled for it to stop—there were very few cars in Vancouver then—and informed the driver that gasoline could be got for twenty cents. The driver expressed astonishment and surprise. At the moment there was a huge cotton banner strung across the front of the West End Garage on Granville Street which read, "GASOLINE. 30¢."

This appeared following a "fight" between the garages; they had been charging 35¢; thirty-five cents for liquid piped out of tank wagon into their tanks for twenty cents. No tax those days—15¢ profit on 20¢.

That afternoon the first car appeared at the warehouse on Smythe Street and was filled by pouring from big five gallon buckets into a big funnel. It was a messy business, and dangerous from the slopping. The next day two or three came, then more, until finally they became a nuisance. They got in the warehouse yard, the horse-drawn trucks of the company could not get next their loading platforms; loaded teams could not get out of the yard; finally the foreman, R.C. (Bud) Mulligan locked the yard gate, and stuck up a sign, "Automobiles not allowed inside." The bucket brigade functioned in the roadway, after packing the heavy buckets, one in each hand, backwards and forwards.